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Spacing Palestine through the home.

Abstract

This paper explores connections that can be made between houses, homes and violence in Palestine, and representational consequences of making such connections. Drawing on ethnographic field research in Birzeit, I put recent work on critical geographies of home into conversation with geographies and geopolitics of Palestine. I criticize the tendency to represent Palestinian geographies almost entirely through the lens of the Israeli Occupation. While such studies have a great deal of value both academically and politically, this paper augments such work by developing a different focus and a different representational approach. I use detailed ethnographic vignettes and interviews to engage with the domestic practices that make particular Birzeiti homes. These intimate domestic encounters underpin my argument that there is a need for more work that apprehends Palestinian geographies as complexities that bear a relation to, but are not fully determined by the Israeli Occupation.

Keywords: Palestine, Home, House Demolitions, Occupation, Representation

Spacing Palestine through the home.

It's the middle of February 2006, and I'm sat in the rectangular guest room of Im Faisal's¹ house in Birzeit, talking to Im Faisal, her daughter-in-law Maia and Maia's son Khaled. The guest room has large windows on two sides of the room, that stretch from the ceiling to the floor, allowing the winter sun to heat the room, making this room slightly warmer than others. We are sat on the decorative sofas that line three sides of the room and surround a glass table, on which Maia has just placed a tray with cups of tea and a bowl of Im Faisal's date biscuits. On the walls sit a picture of Jerusalem identifiable by the Dome of the Rock, and a tapestry of Im Faisal's family tree, stretching back four generations. The room opens out into a hallway leading to the bedrooms, bathroom and kitchen. As Maia finally sits down after her back and forth trips to the kitchen, Khaled starts to talk about another house.

Khaled: Downstairs would be the kitchen and the living room like we have here. Upstairs was supposed to be the bedrooms and all that. But then they just took it over before we finished building it, so only one storey was built. They took off all the wood from the windows and burnt it, and broke all the tiles on the floor. And they started making fires inside the house, so now it's probably going to be impossible to fix up. Even if we did want to build there, and even if they allowed us to, we'd have to demolish the house and build a brand new one.

¹ Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of all research participants throughout this paper.

Khaled is a young man in his mid-twenties and resident of Birzeit, a village just north of Ramallah in the centre of the West Bank. The house he is talking about is the one his father began to build in the mid-80s on the outskirts of Birzeit (see plate 1). The ‘they’ who took it over in 1987 were, and continue to be, the Israeli Occupation Forces³. The house was initially used as a temporary military base after it was stolen and subsequently an Israeli checkpoint was built right next to it.

The checkpoint is located right next to a bridge connecting Birzeit to the neighbouring village of Atara. Beneath this bridge runs a road that connects Israeli settlement colonies in the West Bank with Israeli settlements on the western side of the 1949 Armistice Line⁴, including Tel Aviv. The Israeli checkpoint was built across the bridge in 1993, and is still present at the time of writing. Some Birzeitis suggest the checkpoint was built to prevent people throwing rocks at the settler-colonists’ cars passing below, although the Mayor of Birzeit told me it was built to restrict movement between areas B and C (as imposed by the Oslo Accords)⁵. The checkpoint mainly controls (and often prevents)

² Although I speak basic Arabic, I conducted interviews in Arabic with the help of a translator who also helped me translate and transcribe the quotations. During the course of my research I interviewed people who had lived in Birzeit for most or all of their lives (‘permanent residents’), students who rented accommodation while studying at Birzeit University, diasporic Palestinians who had grown up in Birzeit but now live (mainly) in Amman, Jordan and in the US, and some refugees who moved to Birzeit after the *nakba* in 1948. All of the people quoted in this paper are ‘permanent residents’, with the exception of Dina who was a student from Tulkarem.

³ I use the term Israeli Occupation Forces to refer to the network of army, ‘security’ services, judiciary, state bureaucracies and legislators, settler colonists and many other beside who collectively enable and enact the occupation of Palestinian lands. See Weizman 2007.

⁴ The generally recognized international border of Israel, also known as the Green Line.

⁵ According to the protocols established at Oslo, Area B was under Palestinian civil control, but Israeli military control, while Area C was under full Israeli control.

traffic from villages west of Birzeit (i.e. closer to the green line) from reaching Ramallah and visa versa (see Harker 2009).

I begin at this site to explore different connections that can be made between houses, homes and violence in Palestine. The links between homes and violence have been established in different places and across different scales, ranging from studies of homeland dispossession (e.g. Harris 2002, Hage 1996) to the much more intimate (although not necessarily less extensive) experiences of domestic violence and harassment (Meth 2003, Valentine 1998). I take this violence as my starting point and begin with the destruction of houses in Palestine (Falah 1996, Graham 2004) and the statistical monitoring of such violence in the Occupied Territories (B'Tselem 2002, 2007). I then juxtapose the destruction of houses with socio-culture meanings of home in this context to widen the implications of this violence.

However, regardless of how detailed this rendering is, focusing on the destruction of Palestinian houses and homes is insufficient on its own because it persists with the familiar tendency to script Palestinian geographies primarily through the lens of the Israeli Occupation (c.f. Robinson 2003). This is true of both long-standing geopolitical analyses of the spaces and politics of Israel/Palestine, (Falah 1996, 2003, Newman 2002), and more recent approaches that have studied the quotidian practices of Occupation within Palestine (Halper 2000, Weizman 2007). While I appreciate the academic and political value of these approaches to conceptualizing Palestinian space, I am interested in the opportunities that exist to augment and expand them in new directions (Harker

2006, Gibson-Graham 2004). To this end, I explore recent arguments by anthropologists Stein & Swedenburg (2004) and sociologist Taraki (2006) that call for a more sustained and complex engagement with social and cultural issues in this context, and examine what this might mean for *geographies* of Palestine. Hammami's (2004, 2006) studies of checkpoints in the West Bank demonstrates that such an approach, while avoiding the construction of an overarching narrative about, for example, occupation and mobility (c.f. Halper 2000), can nevertheless help us understand some contemporary Palestinian experiences of life under occupation, and the spaces and politics that co-constitute such experiences (see also Kelly 2008). In the conclusion, I use specific domestic stories and practices that are entwined with the Palestinian homes presented in this paper to argue for more work that apprehends Palestinian spaces as complexities that bear a relation to, but are not fully determined by the Israeli Occupation. A focus on domestic practices is crucial since it allows for the elucidation of some of the complex social and cultural geographies in Palestine, and thus begins to address Taraki's (2006: xxvii) recent complaint that '[a] preoccupation with Palestinian political economy and political institutions has precluded a serious study of social and cultural issues'.

Throughout the paper I use ethnographic vignettes and interviews⁶ to create a sense of intimacy with the people and spaces of Birzeit. This style of writing mimics to a certain extent the work of contemporary Palestinian authors such as Barghouti (2000) and Shehadeh (2008), whose work challenges 'the long tradition of Western travellers and

⁶ I lived in Birzeit for eleven months over the course of my doctoral research. This included a two month period in the summer of 2005, an eight month period (January-August 2006) during which time I conducted interviews with local residents, and a one month visit in October 2007. While Crang (2002) notes that one of the challenges of using participant observation as a research methodology is finding time to do it, doctoral research is perhaps one opportunity to conduct research without too many other commitments.

colonizers who simply would not see the land's Palestinian population' (Shehadeh 2008: xv). As I will argue later in this paper, there is a tendency for geopolitical scholarship to repeat this rhetorical manoeuvre (Newman 2002, Weizman 2002, 2004). My methodological/textual approach also contributes to the growing number of studies that have heeded Herbert's (2000) call for more ethnographic approaches within the discipline of Geography (see for example Larsen 2008, Bailey 2007). I envision an ethnographic approach in a manner similar to Hörschelmann & Stenning (2008: 355), as a mode of engagement that is 'more inclusive of, as well as relevant to, the concerns of people in the majority of the world' partially because it helps to provincialize universal western knowledge claims⁷. This approach builds on arguments made for the renewal of a critical regional geography (Robinson 2003) and/or area studies (Gibson-Graham 2004) that takes (post)colonial critiques seriously, while also questioning the ways in which certain (Western) approaches to conducting and writing academic research embody a dynamic of universalization/exclusion (see also Pollard et al 2009). I have argued elsewhere (Harker 2007) that intimacy can be utilized as a form of ethical response to orientalist narratives that fold distance (both cultural and spatial) into difference, which are partly responsible for allowing the atrocities that occur in Palestine to continue (see Gregory 2004). In this paper I focus on domestic spaces and practices precisely because they create more intimate knowledges about the people and things that produce such spaces than many geopolitical studies of Palestine (Newman 2002, Weizman 2002). The broader ethnographic approach I develop in this article can therefore be seen as one attempt to put into practice a specific witnessing of space (Agamben 1999, Dewsbury 2003). Such an

⁷ Given my specific research context, I am wary of exhortations for more multi-site/mobile ethnographies (see Hage 2005), since relative immobility is a central concern and challenge to everyday life (Makdisi 2008, Harker 2009).

approach produces a textual cartography in place of a conventional map. This form of cartography is a response to the Israeli colonization of the land surface, ground water aquifers, air space and electromagnetic spectrum, which has crashed ‘three dimensions into six: three Israeli and three Palestinian’ (Benvenisti, quoted in Weizman 2007: 15). Weizman (2002: n.p.) describes this ‘territorial ecosystem of externally alienated, internally homogenised enclaves located next to, within, above or below each other’ as ‘Escher-like’, splintering conventional two dimensional cartographic representations that employ a god’s-eye view.

Apprehending Palestinian Homes, part 1.

The destruction of homes in Palestine has a long history. One of the most significant consequences of the Palestinian *Nakba* (catastrophe) in 1948 (Khalidi 1998, Kimmerling & Migdal 2003, Pappe 2004), in which an estimated 711000 Palestinians were forced from their land (United Nations 1950) in what became the state of Israel, was the widespread loss of homes, many of which were subsequently destroyed. Falah (1996) draws on archival evidence and research from this period (particularly Morris 2004), to revisit 407 of the 418 rural villages that were abandoned by Palestinians during the *Nakba*. He finds that over two-thirds of these villages have been subject to high levels of destruction, which he defines as ‘complete obliteration; complete destruction with rubble of original houses clearly identified but no walls standing; houses mostly demolished with rubble containing standing walls but without roofs’ (p268). The remaining one third of these villages has been subject to ‘major destruction and partial occupancy’ (p273).

Falah suggests that the obliteration of Palestinian houses, public and religious buildings in these villages is directly linked with Israeli efforts to Judaicize the landscape by destroying markers of past Palestinian identity (p281). Khaled's experience of dispossession, outlined at the beginning of this article, can be contextualised within this broader trajectory of land theft and house demolitions experienced by Palestinians since 1948. However, Khaled's house is built on lands that Israeli occupied only after 1967, and unlike the places Falah (1996) visits, the rest of the village property remains (largely) untouched by the occupation forces, at least in the manner which Falah describes.

Halper (2000: 15), whose work focuses on Palestinian land occupied since 1967, suggests that the Israeli Occupation has established a matrix of control, 'an interlocking series of mechanisms, only a few of which require physical occupation of territory, that allow Israel to control every aspect of Palestinian life in the Occupied Territories'. Israel has achieved this control through a range of military, bureaucratic and legal measures, and most relevant to this discussion, by establishing facts on the ground, which include building illegal settlements, by-pass roads, controlling aquifers and restricting the movement of Palestinians. As Graham (2004: 194) notes, '[a] strategy of deliberate urban *destruction* is closely integrated with Israel's efforts at carefully planned *construction* of place and space in the Occupied Territories'⁸. He suggests that the destruction of Palestinian property and infrastructure is part of 'asymmetric urbicide': the 'overwhelming effort of both sides ... to try to deny the rights of the "enemy" to their respective, city based, lives' (Graham 2004: 193). While Birzeit is located on the rural-

⁸ Equally, Birzeit's location on the rural-urban fringe could be used to critique Graham's work, which ignores the much more extensive confiscation and destruction of *rural* land by the Israeli Occupation Forces and the effects this has on Palestinian urbanization.

urban fringe of Ramallah, the house that Khaled's father began to build could be one example of the Israeli Occupation Forces efforts to 'forcibly demodernize Palestinian urban society' (Ibid). The presence of the checkpoint now standing next to the shell of Khaled's house – an example of the de/construction dialectic Halper and Graham discuss – forms part of what Weizman (2002, 2004, 2007) terms Israel's 'politics of verticality', which results in a specific 'geometry of occupation'. Weizman (2002: n.p.) argues in a similar vein to Graham that 'a colossal project of strategic, territorial and architectural planning has lain at the heart of the Israeli- Palestinian conflict. The landscape and the built environment became the arena of conflict'. Weizman describes this process as a 'politics of verticality' because as the occupation has become entrenched, 'new and intricate frontiers were invented, like the temporary borders later drawn up in the Oslo Interim Accord, under which the Palestinian Authority was given control over isolated territorial 'islands', but Israel retained control over the airspace above them and the sub-terrain beneath... crashing "three-dimensional space into six dimensions – three Jewish and three Arab"' (Ibid). The combination of (Atara) checkpoint built on (Atara) bridge over settlement-colony road that we find on the outskirts of Birzeit exemplifies one such complex geometry.

There has also been a great deal of work on Palestinian homes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip carried out by Human Rights Organisations and other NGOs, that in some cases is related to this academic work⁹. The Israeli Committee Against House Demolitions (ICAHD) is a direct action group set up in 1977 specifically to oppose and

⁹ For instance Weizman collaborated on B'Tselem's (2002) report on Israeli settlements, and Halper, a former professor of Anthropology at Ben Gurion University, founded and organizes ICAHD.

resist house demolitions¹⁰. ICAHD estimates that “since 1967 Israel has demolished almost 12,000 Palestinian homes, leaving some 70,000 [people] without shelter and traumatized” <http://www.icahd.org>. The demolition of houses in particular has received a growing amount of critical attention since the beginning of the Al Aqsa Intifada in 2000. B’Tselem, the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, has maintained detailed statistics since 2004 that monitor the number of Palestinian houses that have been destroyed as punishment, for alleged military purposes, and those that were built without Israeli permits and thus deemed illegal (see figure 1). In addition to a detailed study on house demolitions in 2004 (Amnesty International 2004), Amnesty International included an entire section on house and property destruction in its 2006 report on Israel and the Occupied Territories (see Amnesty International 2006).

¹⁰ Information courtesy of ICAHD.

Figure 1 – Statistics on home demolitions in Palestinian Territories

- From October 2001 to January 2005, Israel demolished 668 homes in the Occupied Territories as punishment.
- Since 2004, Israel has demolished 1739 Palestinian houses for alleged military purposes.
- Since 1987, there have been 1946 houses demolished in the West Bank because they were built without an Israeli issued permit.

All statistics from <http://www.btselem.org>

Much academic literature and the work of NGOs thus focuses on now familiar forms of place making within the West Bank and Gaza Strip – at least to a non-Palestinian audience. Each study draws attention, in slightly different ways, to how Israel occupies Palestine land. In each account, the practice of occupation results in the destruction of Palestinian property and infrastructure, the construction of Israeli property and infrastructure, and increasing Israeli control over Palestinian lives. Through these studies (Halper 2000, Graham 2004) and reports (Amnesty International 2004, 2006), the destruction of houses is therefore one of the primary ways in which Palestinian space is made knowable¹¹. Combined together, this academic and activist work provides one important way of understanding the demolition of Khaled's house, and links that experience with those of other Palestinians and the broader political processes responsible for the destruction/construction/control. This dominant approach to narrating

¹¹ This is also the case in Palestinian contexts beyond the Occupied Territories. See for example Ramadan's (2009) discussion of the destruction of Nahr al Bared Refugee Camp in Lebanon.

Palestinian space also links to wider geopolitical approaches to the production and performance of national space (see Kuus 2009 for review) and territory (Elden 2005)¹². Given the ongoing nature of these colonial processes in Palestine, this body of geopolitical scholarly and activist work can and has been used to generate important intellectual resources for political struggle in solidarity with the Palestinian people¹³.

However, (re)telling Khaled's story as a house demolition risks not only drowning the particular within the general (a threat that hangs over most social science research), but more importantly makes this particular event subservient to the rhetorical conventions that are used to talk about the general (Robinson 2003). It would take an extremely insensitive person to dismiss the destruction of the house that Khaled's father began to build as just another statistic. However, one danger of narrating the violence that dispossessed Khaled's family of their living space through tropes such as 'urbicide', a 'matrix of control' or a 'politics of verticality' is the risk of homogenizing and anaesthetizing this event discursively, which in turn allows parts of this event and what these parts encompass to be passed over far too quickly. Robinson (2003:279) has argued that '[w]e need to be constantly on the alert for such moves that reinstate a sense of "knowledge" of other places serving "our" purposes and concerns, whatever these might be'. One possible consequence of such a rhetorical maneuver in the context of Palestine is that it produces a 'hollow land' (Weizman 2007), largely devoid of the Palestinian people who continue to make their lives there.

¹² There is of course recent geopolitical work that has focused on actors largely outside the political sphere of the State (Hyndman 2007; Dahlman & O'Tuathail 2005a, b). However, I tend to underplay a geopolitical analyses for explicit intellectual and political reasons, more fully elaborated below.

¹³ See for example B'Tselem (2002). The work of NGOs obviously helps in many other ways too, such as efforts by the ICAHD to rebuild demolished houses in East Jerusalem.

Always house demolitions, never home demolitions

This tension between the particular and general can also be represented through language. When talking and writing about the destruction of Palestinian property, it is usually a case of *house* demolitions and rarely *home* demolitions. This slippage perhaps occurs easily when moving from Arabic to English, since the Arabic word *beit* can be translated as both house and home. However, in English, while house refers to a built structure, as Blunt & Dowling (2006: 1) point out in their recent book on the subject, there are *multiple* experiences of home.

Some may speak of the physical structure of their house or dwelling; others may refer to relationships or connections over space and time. You might have positive or negative feelings about home, or a mixture of the two. Your sense of home might be closely shaped by your memories of childhood, alongside your present experiences and your dreams for the future.

I understand the term house demolitions to mean the destruction of a built form used as/for housing, and the term home demolitions to imply the destruction of a set of material, social and affective relations that constitute home. While writing about house demolitions may invoke images of a bulldozer reducing concrete, steel and other building materials to a pile of rubble (see the images in Graham 2004 for instance), talking about home demolitions broadens the discussion to examine the extensive economic, political,

cultural and social geographies (and temporalities) of such violence. My understanding of home demolitions is very similar to what Porteous and Smith (2001: 12) term 'domicide... defined as the deliberate destruction of home by human agency in pursuit of specified goals, which causes suffering to the victim'. Since home can mean many things to many people, domicile has many different forms, including 'eviction, exile, expropriation, displacement, dislocation and relocation' (ibid), which take place across a range of spatial extensions, such as the destruction of a single dwelling, a neighbourhood or an ethnic homeland. What unites these experiences is that this destruction of home (in whatever its form) is both meaningful (because people value their homes) and common (the authors suggest thirty million people across the globe have suffered the direct effects of domicile). Porteous and Smith, aware that 'home has complex, multiple, but interrelated meanings' (p61), nevertheless focus on just two: 'home as centre – a place of refuge, freedom, possession, shelter and security', and 'home as identity – with themes of family, friends and community, attachment, rootedness, memory and nostalgia' (Ibid.). These dual foci underpin their point that 'what is lost is not only the physical place, but the entire emotional essence of home – aspects of personal self-identity' (p63). Their general point is that it is important to consider the great variety of ways in which home demolitions impact people. However, their definitions of home tend to romanticize this time-space and can be contested by (among others things) particular forms of homelessness (May 2000), discrimination (Valentine 1998) or victims of domestic violence (Meth 2003). Given the wide variety of spaces that count as a home (Blunt & Dowling 2006), it is important to define exactly what sort of 'home' is being destroyed.

When I asked Birzeitis how they defined home, their responses usually mentioned two things: family and the security of being in place, which do in fact fit within Porteous and Smiths' dual typology of home as centre and identity. Firstly, the home is the space of the family, which is to say it is the primary conduit for social relations. As two young men in their early twenties put it:

Omar: The home is the family, which is the core of the Palestinian society.

Tarek: The home is where I was raised, where I've been looked after since my childhood and where I'm still looked after. It's mine and it is a part of me.

Interview conducted in Arabic, 6th May 2006.

The links between home, family and society in Palestine were repeatedly made by people I met in Birzeit. Home is the space where one is with their family, where they can receive friends and relatives and visit them in turn, and if they want to start a family, they'll need to make a home first. Khaled's younger brother, Ahmad, put this sentiment in the following terms:

Ahmad: Most girls are like, hell no, I ain't going to live with your mum. You've got to get yourself a place. And if you're renting a house, it's as if you don't have one in this country. You know, you've got to buy the land and build the house.

Interview conducted in English, 24th February 2006.

In Palestine, the family not only refers to the immediate nuclear family (*ayla*), but also the extended family or clan (*hamula*). In many cases people maintain strong social ties with their extended family. One example of this is that many people in Birzeit continue the long established practice of living in close proximity to both their immediate and extended family. Ahmad's quote also highlights what quickly becomes ethnographically apparent, that home and family in Palestine, as in many other countries, are concepts that take on a highly gender-specific form. If the immediate family is imagined in nearly every instance as a heterosexual social unit, then making a home is a labour that is divided according to gender. As Ahmad suggests building and owning a house is scripted as a male responsibility. Ola, a working mother of two, suggests that the actual domestic labour required to continually (re-)make a home – female labour – gives home added importance for women.

Ola: The home to a woman is like her kingdom, her own country. But to the man, is just a house that he wants to live in. For example in the home the wife wants to plant some things, to keep everything clean and so on, to arrange the table nice, to choose the colour for the curtains. The man says whatever. The woman looks for small details more than the man does in the home. In a small house like mine, my husband doesn't find it hard to deal with, but I find it harder because I have to deal with it directly. I know better than him that it's not enough.

Interview conducted in English and Arabic, 4th April 2006.

Secondly, and related to the family, home is associated with a sense of security. The following two men, Waleed in his twenties, and Moussa in his fifties, explained the importance of the home as a space of security.

Waleed: I feel safe because I live with my brothers, sisters, father and mother.
You feel secure when you are surrounded by your relatives.

Interview conducted in Arabic, 27th April 2006.

Moussa: It means everything. The home is family, loyalty, devotion, birthplace.
The last thing you defend.

Interview conducted in Arabic, 17th April 2006.

The security of home is both literal and metaphorical. It is the security of being in place, as part of a family, and as a resident in your village and thus part of a broader community. While historically the idea of security also has a very literal meaning, as homes would be built with the express purpose of repelling invaders, nowadays, it has taken on a more economic and political meaning, as shrinking land resources and almost continual recession make owning your own home an important safety net. Even if someone is without work, they will still have a roof over their head. Dina, who is in her twenties and Fatima, who is in her thirties, make the point in the following manner.

Dina: I'm lucky to have one, because otherwise I wouldn't have a house and we would have to rent, and in this country renting is a disaster, with this economic situation, and the political one.

Interview conducted in English, 11th May 2006.

Fatima: At least, worst comes to worst, you have a roof to stay under. Here they say this thing: you can eat Zeit ou Zaater [Oil and Thyme mix on Bread] and not worry because you have a home.

Interview conducted in English, 21st February 2006.

Khaled understood home in the following manner.

Khaled: As long as someone has a home, then that person is stable. They have somewhere to be. They're not in the streets, they're not anywhere else. So most Palestinians see it this way. If you have a home, if you own the house you're living in, and you're stable enough, other things will come in time. But the most important thing is establishing yourself in a home.

Interview conducted in English, 24th February 2006.

Given his belief that 'if you have a home... other things will come in time', the theft and destruction of the house his father was building not only deprived Khaled of a space to live and feel secure, but also deprived him of a stable future. This destruction of Khaled's future home – rather than the one in which he lived in and consequently remains in to this

day – complicates and extends Porteous and Smiths’ thesis on domicide through consideration of the temporalities of home. While home is spatially distributed, these spatial formations are also co-constituted by various temporalities (Massey 2005). Home for Khaled is not simply a set of spatial relations in and of the (temporal) present, but also a set of relations extending towards the future. Hence Khaled experiences domicide despite the fact that his home (understood as house, community and homeland) has not been destroyed. This experience is possible because of the multiple, co-existing temporalities of his home (Chowers 2002).

Thinking about Khaled’s experience as a *home* demolition - something that impacts a whole series of material, social and affective processes connected with his home - demands a consideration of how this act of violence (and others like it) involves far more than just turning carefully constructed building materials into piles of rubble (i.e. a house demolition). The term home demolitions invokes multiple and in each case unique experiences of destruction and loss, while still connecting those experiences with the more spatially extensive practices of occupation that cause them. This slight change of phrase provokes a more explicit focus on the materiality of the violence caused by the Israeli Occupation right in the middle of Palestinian everyday lives, rather than just the spaces which those lives occupy. In other words, rather than an image of bulldozers and piles of rubble that the phrase *house* demolitions conjures up, thinking about *home* destructions too demands a more careful consideration of the economic, social and cultural networks that constitute and are constituted by people like Khaled (see also Taraki 2006). If such networks form both family and society in Palestine, home

demolitions in this context strikes at the core of a very specific network of social practices (see Amnesty International 2004)¹⁴. These experiences are similar to many other instances of domicide that have occurred throughout the world (Porteous & Smith 2001), but their specificity points to the importance of space and time (i.e. very particular geographies) in shaping such experiences.

Apprehending Palestinian Homes, part 2: other homes in Birzeit

There is a disjuncture between representing Birzeiti homes and Palestinians homes more generally as vulnerable (to demolition), and the perceptions residents of Birzeit have of home as a secure space. This disjuncture brings to light the broader issue of how Palestine is scripted as a space more generally. Using the term home demolitions (as opposed to house demolitions) still apprehends Palestinian homes through the lens of the Israeli Occupation. I now introduce a second person and a second home in the village of Birzeit to move from an analysis that takes the Israeli Occupation as its focus, to one that has Palestinian homes in themselves as its primary subject. In doing so, I show that different representations can form the basis for a potentially more extensive engagement with Palestine.

Abdullah is Khaled's cousin and similar in age to him. During the course of my research he told me that we should visit his family home in Birzeit's old town [*medina qadima*].

¹⁴ Tracing these connections also invites a complimentary analysis of the Israeli Occupation as an unstable site at which among other things laws, bureaucracies, physical constructions, capital flows and the actions of millions of people collide and intermingle, rather than some grand scheme, of which house demolitions form one part. In short, I think of occupation as a processual verb rather than as a totalizing noun.

As suggested in the previous section, ideas around home are tied closely to notions of family. Abdullah's family home – called *Dar Mohim* [literally the house of the Mohim family] – was built by his grandfather, and formed one side of a square courtyard [*housh*], around which his three great uncles – including Khaled's grandfather – built their homes. Hence when Abdullah talks about his family home, this idea references both the immediate nuclear family [*ayla*] and the extended family [*hamula*].

The Birzeit old town consists almost completely of stone buildings built just after the turn of the previous century and although it is now largely deserted (and potentially about to become a heritage site), it still retains an important place in the collective Birzeiti psyche as the core of the current community. Many of older generation in Birzeit grew up there, and while most built new homes elsewhere in the village, they still own the properties that once belonged to their parents and grandparents before them. The old town's location, flanked by the municipal buildings, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) girls' school, all three churches and close to the village's largest mosque, ensure it remains physically at the centre of the town too, mirroring its enduring social status. Abdullah's desire to show me his familial home should be seen within this context as a claim to space that literally takes place through very particular social networks (the family) that are interwoven with the material fabric of the village, which, through its endurance, has become the village's history.

The first thing I noticed when I visited *Dar Mohim* was that large parts of the house have now fallen down/apart, leaving the remnants of the original home, piles of stone rubble

and a fairly healthy covering of foliage (see plate 2). I was offered a number of explanations for this. The first time Abdullah mentioned his familial home, he told me that an Israeli rocket had destroyed it. A few weeks later, he mentioned his family home again, but this time he said the Israeli Army had detonated a bomb there because they thought some political agitators were hiding inside. During the course of our visit to *Dar Mohim*, Abdullah said no one really knew how the building had fallen apart. Abdullah's sister subsequently told me that heavy winter snow had caused the disused house to partially collapse.

Rather than evaluate this progression of narratives as a set of competing truth claims, each can be thought of as an equally valid possibility for telling the story of this particular home's destruction. I argue for pursuing such a strategy because the competing narratives that accompany the rubble and foliage in creating this particular home space are an effective cipher for stories about Palestinian homes and Palestinian spaces more generally. It is possible to tell stories about Palestinian spaces that begin and end with the Israeli Occupation. It is certainly entirely plausible that *Dar Mohim* was destroyed by the malevolent actions of the occupation forces. However, telling such stories, while referencing the manifold ways in which practices of occupation have brutal effects on Palestinian civilians, ignores or minimizes the other ways in which Palestinians live their lives, which may or may not be more or less intertwined with ongoing practices of colonial occupation. Taraki (2006: xxvii) has recently argued that '[a] preoccupation with Palestinian political economy and political institutions has precluded a serious study of social and cultural issues'. Stein & Swedenburg (2004:15-6) also suggest that attending

to culture can help us rethink and remap power and politics in Palestine (and Israel). I would argue that a corollary exists in geographic research. Palestine is produced as site of/for geopolitics rather than socio-cultural geographies; a case of how ‘different places come to stand in, stereotypically, for certain kinds of events or processes’ (Robinson 2003: 279). One example of an alternative representational rendering of Palestinian space is Hammami’s (2004, 2006) ethnographies of the Surda and Kalandia checkpoints during the height of the second intifada, which explore the quotidian cultural dimensions of these spaces. Rather than focusing on the broader patterns of immobility that these checkpoints produce (c.f. Halper 2000), she instead argues for the emergence of a new Palestinian public sphere at these sites. Taraki (2008: 62) meanwhile examines Ramallah as an increasingly cosmopolitan city, shaped by very particular practices of education, imaginative geographies of conspicuous consumption and ‘a new globalized and modernist urban middle-class ethos’. While Khaled’s narrative and the first two stories Abdullah told me focus on the Israeli Occupation, Abdullah’s ambiguity and his sister’s story about snow also disclose a series of other Palestinian spatial stories.

Dar Mohim – the house that Abdullah’s grandparents lived in – was and remains bound by some of these other lives and spaces as much as by the Israeli Occupation. Other stories that Abdullah told me about the house that his grandfather lived in, include a number of tales about the ways in which residents of Birzeit used to live in the earlier part of last century, making frequent reference to the whole family living under one roof, the fact that most people spent most of the day outdoors and the use of the ground floor as a stable for animals. A story about the movement of villagers away from the crowded

old town towards more spacious plots of land included a history of a relative who died fighting in the Balkans, after he was conscripted to fight among the Ottoman forces there. The narratives about the subsequent degeneration of *Dar Mohim* once people no longer lived there contrasted with the house opposite owned by one of Khaled's grandmother, which remains structurally intact. At the time of research, this house provided a free residence to two male students from Khalil [Hebron], who couldn't afford to pay rent and live in a more modern establishment. Abdullah's attachment to *Dar Mohim* highlights the importance of these ancient familial homes to modern day residents. While they may no longer live in them, they still use their homes discursively to make interconnected claims to Birzeiti space and familial lineage. While such claims to space could be scripted within the context of living under Occupation, they could just as easily be articulations of belonging that are similar to a number of other practices of making home space around the world (see for instance Blunt 2003, Dwyer 2002). However, I am not suggesting that any sort of binary between occupation and non-occupation practices exists. Rather, that the collective effect of academic representations of Palestinian homes that focus on house and/or home demolitions is to talk up the Occupation and downplay and even abstracts the aspects of domestic practice that are *less* entwined with practices of occupation.

This argument finds a complement in Gregory's (2004) work on different colonial presents. Gregory examines the ways in which the Israeli Occupation has made Palestinian spaces into abstractions. Tracing the way in which Palestine has been made into Areas A, B and C (see Gregory 2004, 137: figure 6.10) – "topological abstractions produced by a strategic-instrumental discourse of political and military power" (p96) –

Gregory suggests that “the violence of abstraction has folded into itself an ever more profound de-corporealization of place and space” (p136). Palestinian writer Mourid Barghouti (2000: 21) describes this process in the following way:

The Occupation has created generations without a place whose colors, smells and sounds they can remember; a first place that belongs to them, that they can return to in their memories and their cobbled together exiles... The Occupation has created generations of us that have to adore an unknown beloved, distant, difficult, surrounded by guards, by walls, by nuclear missiles, by sheer terror. (Barghouti 2000: 62)

While Gregory and Barghouti’s target is the practices of occupation, a similar critique of abstracting Palestinian spaces may apply to a great deal of work that is written in solidarity with the Palestinian cause, including some of the geographies that I discussed earlier. Note for instance the abstract geometries implicated in Halper’s ‘matrix of control’ and Weizman’s ‘politics of verticality’. Such writing about Palestine, by taking the practices of the Israeli Occupation as its main subject, (whether these are house demolitions or the many other consequences that result from them), subtly re-creates Palestine as a space that is only known through practices of occupation and the violence they entail. Palestine is performed textually as a ‘hollow land’, where Palestinian lives are alluded to, but rarely elucidated. Approaching Palestine in an alternative manner is however very difficult precisely because the Israeli Occupation does have such a significant impact on so many aspects of Palestinian life. As Taraki (2006: xii) insists,

‘the political reality must be the basic backdrop against which we examine the routines of life and the small dramas of daily life’.

Writing the Palestinian Home. (A continuation)

One way to apprehending Palestine in a different manner is to return to Khaled’s story with which I began, but instead of focusing on the story per se, give greater consideration to the location in which it was told. Im Faisal’s home may be far less of a spectacle than the other two homes that I have discussed, remarkable only for its warmth in winter and date biscuits, but its importance as a familial and secure space is perhaps heightened in comparison. While it would be easy to also narrate this space only through the Occupation – the picture of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem symbolizing the desire for the right of return – the opportunity also exists to complicate this narrative. The date biscuits and more explicitly the tapestry depicting the family tree not only pre-date the Israeli Occupation of Palestine, but also gesture at enduring cultural practices and the grounding of ‘individual’ identity in the family in Palestinian society, even as the overt symbolism of the Dome of the Rock picture (in a Christian home) nevertheless emphasizes how intertwined these practices and identities are with the ongoing occupation.

Furthermore, I would argue that writing and talking about things such as date biscuits and the slow deterioration of *Dar Mohim*, punctuated by the sudden collapse of the home possibly due to winter snowfall, can become conscious political strategy precisely because it refuses to script Palestinian homes through the well worn tropes of violence,

Occupation related suffering and dispossession (see also Kelly 2008, Robinson 2003). While such a maneuver might at first seem apolitical, I would argue that talking about Palestinian homes solely in terms of violent dispossession casts the Palestinians in question – in this case Khaled and Abdullah – out from the realm of complex and multifaceted humans and into the realm of abstractions, whether these are martyrs, refugees or simply victims. In contrast, finding additional space for the winter's snowfall, time's passing and date biscuits in Birzeit begins to work with the complex circumstances of daily life that I encountered when doing research there. Such an approach eschews over-generalizing stories and well-worn tropes in favour of particular circumstances that allow for specific solidarities, which in turn gesture at more extensive practices of living in the West Bank. Instead of a hollow land (Weizman 2007), I seek to witness (Agamben 1999, Dewsbury 2003, Harker 2007) a Palestine that is decidedly 'full'.

There is now an established politics of directly confronting the Israeli Occupation through direct action activism, lobbying, advocacy work and education. Such political work has established Palestine as 'a moral cause' among a very particular set of international networks, primarily through a human rights discourse that condemns the manifold wrongdoings that are intrinsically part of occupying another nation. Such work is both absolutely necessary and in some circumstances effective. This is particularly the case when organizations are able to generate quantitative data (see B'Tselem 2007 and Amnesty International 2004), given the widespread 'trust in numbers' (Porter 1995).

However, what I want to suggest is that it may also prove beneficial to explore and experiment with complimentary strategies. People such as Khaled and Abdullah have their own specific cultural and historical contexts, and while they have undoubtedly been affected in many different ways by the actions of the Israeli Occupation, they are also people who have been affected by time and snowfall. I think foregrounding the multifaceted nature of Khaled and Abdullah's pasts and presents might help us to imagine a Palestinian future that is not tied so intimately to Israeli Occupation, where Palestinians move beyond tropes such as refugee, victim or terrorist¹⁵. Similarly, the homes of Khaled and Abdullah are complex sites at which ideas around family and security, the construction and destruction of built materials, and some of the histories and geographies of Birzeit village and Palestine intersect¹⁶. These domestic spaces and practices (in contrast to the demolished home) are an effective milieu for generating more complex representations because of the banal, quotidian and intimate practices that take place there, (in addition to the violent and/or destructive processes that may co-constitute such sites). Envisioning Palestinians in Birzeit as people who make homes in particular ways, while nevertheless living under occupation, encourages greater degrees of intimate engagement than geopolitical analyses (Weizman 2007). Intimacy is important in this context because it challenges the orientalist practices of folding distance (both cultural and spatial) into difference that are partly responsible for allowing the atrocities that occur in Palestine to continue (Said 1986, Gregory 2004). This argument builds on

¹⁵ Famed Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish once hoped for 'a normal life where we [Palestinians] are neither heroes nor victims' (Darwish, quoted in Gregory 2004, 138).

¹⁶ Another example: after I wrote the first draft of this paper, I visited Birzeit again. When I met Abdullah, he was excited to tell me that he currently seeking funding that will help him renovate Dar Mohim. Once his familial home has been rebuilt, he hopes to create a small museum and set up an computer and internet training facility that can (re-)educate local people who are currently under-employed.

critical geographies of home that explore not only the intersection of broader relations of power with/in intimate domestic spaces, but also how this intimacy can itself do political work (hooks 1990, Staeheli 1996, Pratt 2004). This mode of academic practice, which heeds Taraki's (2006: xxvii) call for more 'serious study of social and cultural issues' in Palestine, also contributes to the production of what Robinson (2003) calls a more cosmopolitan geography that adopts a post-colonial sensibility and reengages with regional/area studies to avoid the drive towards hegemony, universality and exclusion still present in much western geography (see also Gibson-Graham 2004, Hörschelmann & Stenning 2008, Pollard et al 2009).

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